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THE COMMENSURABILITY OF VALUES.

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AMONG those aspects of the theory of value which relate especially to ethical problems, not the least important is the question whether all values are commensurable. This problem, moreover, has an added interest for those who are unable to accept any monistic theory of the ultimate good; who hold, for example, that neither pleasure nor self-realisation—to take two of the more prominent candidates—represents all that a rational being can aim at as intrinsically valuable. If, then, the *Summum Bonum* is a complex of various elements, it becomes an urgent task for the ethical theorist to discover the interrelations of these various elements, and the way in which, in any given circumstances, due consideration can be given to each in the schematising of conduct.

The object of this paper is to examine that solution of these problems which is offered by Dr. Rashdall in *The Theory of Good and Evil*. It is there held that the Good is a complex of various elements, of which the chief are Virtue, Culture, and Pleasure; that each of these has an intrinsic value of its own;¹ and that the highest of these values is that of Virtue. The problem of conduct, then, is: "Is it possible to compare heterogeneous *goods*—say Virtue, Culture and Pleasure, and say which is *best* . . . is it possible to aim at the production of a greatest quantum of good?" (II, 36). On what principle are we to choose between different kinds of good? The solution advanced is as follows: When every element in the good cannot be realised by any given course of action "we can surely distinguish between the various elements in a human life and form a judgment as to which of them seems more important—a *large amount* of this or a *small amount* of that" (II, 40).

¹ Dr. Rashdall's doctrine seems at times to waver on the question of the intrinsic value of Pleasure: see further below.

"In that estimate we do take into consideration *the amount* of the two kinds of good as well as the quality" (II, 49).

Terminology is here very important; and unfortunately Dr. Rashdall does not always mean the same thing by the word "commensurable." At the commencement of his discussion he gives two definitions of the term. These are as follows: (1) "That a certain amount of one good can be regarded as a sufficient and satisfactory substitute for the other, however much greater be the intrinsic superiority of the latter"; and (2) "when we have to choose between a higher and a lower good—when we cannot have both—we can compare them, and pronounce that one possesses more value than the other" (II, 39). And he explicitly lays it down that values are not commensurable in the first sense, while they are in the second.

It is impossible to regard these distinctions as satisfactory. In the first place, the "commensurability" described in (2) is not commensurability at all, but comparability. The essential differentia of commensurability is its implication, that the "commensurable" terms are reducible to a common measure; or, in a somewhat wider sense, that they are measurable by the same standard. And it is the commensurability of all values, in this sense, that Dr. Rashdall is in reality attempting to prove. Comparability makes no such implication. Now it is perfectly true that values may be referred to a single standard, to a "single primordial value," as Höffding says, "which determines the value of single instants, periods of life, abilities, and impulses"; and determines their value, necessarily, in a quasi-mathematical manner. But such a theory of the good is monistic, and, strictly interpreted, denies all intrinsic value to the single instants, periods, etc. Every element in life, according to this view, has value only in-so far as it realizes, or contributes to the increase of "the single primordial value" which alone has intrinsic value. All values may be distinguished as either intrinsic or "economic"; and if there is only one intrinsic value, all the rest have merely economic value. Dr. Rashdall, however, rightly insists that those values

which are elements in the good are "intrinsic." But if so, they are all ultimate values,² and in no way referable to any more ultimate standard of value. Terms such as "quantity," "degree," "amount," etc., are meaningless, when applied to them *with reference to their relations with each other*.

The same intrinsic quality of these values is again illustrated by such expressions as "a particular kind of value" (I, 138). Now even if we admitted the impossible, and held that all intrinsic values, all the different "kinds" of values, were commensurate to some element present in all of them, that element can only be the good; and—apart from the difficulty here presented by Dr. Rashdall's doctrine of the indefinableness of the Good—this involves us in a tautology, or a logical circle, since we have been told (I, 135, n.) that Value and Good are synonymous terms. If, on the other hand, all values are qualitatively identical, the only standard by which they are commensurable is one of simple quantity. And if so, there can be no ground for saying that "the value of a good character is the greatest of all values" (I, 138). It can be greatest only if, and because, it is greatest in amount; and its amount can always be conceived as liable to be exceeded by an enormous quantity of some other value, or at least by the combined amounts of a plurality of other values.

The phrase, "when we cannot have both," which Dr. Rashdall italicises in his definition of the second sense of "commensurable," is not in point. Few people will be found to deny that intrinsic values are comparable. We can compare virtue with culture, or culture with pleasure, and say that the first term in each comparison has a value intrinsically higher than the second. We can, that is, construct a single scale of intrinsic values. But our ability to do so does not presuppose our ability to secure all of them. The scale can be constructed without any reference to the limitations of our powers of choice in any given situation.

² This does not mean, of course, that all intrinsic values are equally valuable.

Having constructed the scale, however, we must regard it as representing our final judgment as to the relative place of the various goods compared. We accept a definite hierarchy of intrinsic values, in which each occupies a determinate and permanent position. These values are intrinsic—if this were not so there would be no point in constructing the scale—and the most obvious inference that is deducible for the guidance of conduct is that, when it is impossible by any one course of action to realise all, or any two, of them, the highest must always claim allegiance.

This, however, is precisely the inference which Dr. Rashdall does *not draw*. His whole argument is directed to show that “it is right in some cases to prefer a larger amount of a lower good to a smaller amount of a higher good” (II, 44). In other words—since different intrinsic values cannot be referred to any single standard of *measurement*—what he is really trying to prove is that heterogeneous goods are commensurable in precisely that sense of the word which we have found to be its only true sense; in the sense, that is, in which he started by denying their commensurability. It is quite true that “no amount of one kind of good can compensate for the absence or deficiency of the other” (II, 39). As Urban says: “The characteristic of all such acts of preference is sacrifice.”³ Such a statement, however, is out of place in any discussion of values as commensurable. If values are commensurable, they must be reducible to a single standard, which alone has ultimate value; and if in our conduct we realise that single value, there is no more to be said, and no ground for any feeling of loss. Plainly, however, such is not the verdict of the moral consciousness. When we have to choose between different values, be our conviction that we have chosen the higher never so assured, we feel that those values were, in the circumstances, mutually exclusive, and that the loss of the lower good is real and ultimate. We have here further evidence that while values are comparable they are not commensurable.

³ *Valuation: Its Nature and Laws*, p. 367.

It is to be observed that, in the case of any particular value, we can distinguish degrees of approximation to what may be called our ideal of that value. We can say that one action is more virtuous than another, that a particular book, or play, has more "culture-value" than another, and so on. All such distinctions are "quantitative" distinctions within the sphere of the particular value in question. There is no question here of "quantitative" comparison between different intrinsic values. The quality of the value sought for or found in each object, action, feeling, etc., is identical; and, this being the case, we are enabled to pronounce that one is more virtuous, or more pleasurable, than another. In this case, the values possessed by these objects, feelings, and actions, *are* commensurable. It is also possible, within the limits which such a "mathematics of value" will allow, to say that a particular of any kind has so much "pleasure-value," so much "virtue-value," and so on with all the other values recognised. And we may choose between any two or more alternatives on the ground that one has more "virtue-value," etc., than the others. But it is impossible, as we have seen, to go on and say that different intrinsic values are commensurable. If we hold that there is only one intrinsic value, all the other values are commensurable by the standard which it provides; if, on the other hand, we hold that there is a plurality of intrinsic values, all that can be done is to *compare* them as higher or lower in quality; and in that case the greatest conceivable amount of any lower good will all be inferior in value to the smallest amount of any value which ranks higher than it in the scale. We cannot weigh qualities against one another.

It follows from what has been said that the further distinction which Dr. Rashdall proceeds to make—that, namely, between "pleasure-value" and "value in general" (II, 50–7)—is untenable. In another connection, Dr. Rashdall has given us the true view: "There can be only one scale of ultimate values, however heterogeneous the objects which we appraise by that scale" (I, 174). This distinction seems to be due (i) to a lingering doubt as to the

intrinsic value of pleasure—it is clear, however, that its intrinsic value is an integral part of his doctrine⁴—(ii) to a confusion between the two possible scales of value—the comparative scale of values qualitatively different, and such “commensurate” scales as have been already described, and of which the typical example is the Hedonistic Calculus. There is also the implied assumption, not merely that pleasure is an element in every state of consciousness to which we attach value (so much is explicitly stated), but that it is the *only* element common to all valuable states of consciousness. Now, even if these assumptions were correct, it would not follow that there are two ultimate scales of values. That they are, is however, open to grave doubt. It may be that realized virtue is always accompanied by a feeling of pleasure; but this is beside the point. We are concerned with the facts of choice of, or between, values; and it is merely a psychological truism that we often contrast two foreseen states of consciousness as being, the one good, but unpleasant, the other less good, or evil, but pleasant. And even in the case of realised virtue, introspection often fails to reveal any element of pleasure in experiences of moral or religious exaltation; and this is true, however strictly we dissociate the term “pleasure” from its disreputable connections.

It is difficult, notwithstanding what has been said, to see why “value in general” is set over against “pleasure-value” in this uncompromising way. For, whatever “value in general” may mean, it cannot mean any specific kind of value. At least two kinds of value are consistently recognised in the whole of Dr. Rashdall’s great work—those, namely, of Virtue and Culture. And he allows that there may be others. Now, since these values are intrinsic, since

⁴ I am unable to quote any passage in which pleasure is stated in so many words to have intrinsic value. In the sentence, however, previous to that already quoted (I, 174), pleasure is stated to be a “kind of value” differing from virtue only as being at the bottom, instead of at the top, of the same scale; in another passage above quoted (II, 35) it is placed on the same value-scale as virtue; it is also called an “end” (I, 219). Cf. also I, 73, 138.

each has a special character of its own, it is clear that—assuming that the complex which they form is what is denoted by “value in general”—they can be distinguished from “pleasure-value” only as different points—higher or lower—in the one scale of ultimate values. This conclusion is rendered inevitable by the fact that pleasure—in Dr. Rashdall’s view no less than my own—has an intrinsic value which cannot be reduced to the “economic value” which is possessed by all things which are valuable merely as means.

It may appear, after all, that the above criticism of this distinction has been misdirected; that it has resulted in a conclusion which, though rather more detailed—since it separates “pleasure-value” not from “value in general” but from the several values of virtue, culture, etc.—is still essentially the same as that of Dr. Rashdall. This, however, is not the case. The basis of Dr. Rashdall’s distinction is an antithesis between the idea of value and the idea of pleasure (II, 55), the effect of which is to impugn the claim of pleasure to be a real value at all. He contrasts “pleasure-value” with “value in general” in a way in which he would not contrast “virtue-value” with “value in general.” Whereas, on the view of the relation outlined above, “value in general” can be contrasted with “pleasure-value” only in the same sense as that in which it may be contrasted with virtue,—or any other, value. In other words, “value in general,” *as contrasted with any specific value*, can only be a general term denoting all the remaining particular values on that single comparative scale on which *both* the terms of the antithesis are represented. It is quite true that we may “compare states of consciousness as pleasures, and then override that judgment by a second valuation as goods”; but that fact does not justify Dr. Rashdall’s distinction; for we can, as already shown, compare states of consciousness in respect, not only of “pleasure-value,” but of “virtue-value,” “culture-value” and so forth, and override that judgment in a similar fashion. We may hold, for example, that *Jude the Obscure* has more “culture-value” than *Rienzi*, and yet prefer to

read the latter, on the ground of what we may—some of us—regard as the lower “virtue-value” of the former.

According to Dr. Rashdall, the denial of this distinction “between value and pleasure” (II, 55) involves either (i) analyzing all value into pleasure-value; or (ii) merging pleasure-value into value in general; or (iii) the denial that we are sometimes driven to compare pleasure with some higher kind of value. Enough has perhaps been said to show that no one of these conclusions can be deduced from the nature and relations of the values as here understood. In particular, nothing has been said which “involves the refusal to distinguish different elements in the supremely valuable kind of conscious life which the moral consciousness undoubtedly does distinguish.” I am tempted to think that it is just the *refusal* “to merge the idea of pleasure in that of value”—understanding that expression to mean the inclusion of pleasure as a distinct value in the one scale of ultimate values—which would lead us to lose sight of these distinctions. If pleasure is the one element which is found in all states of consciousness to which we attach value, we will inevitably tend to make it the standard by which to decide our choice between any given alternatives.

Reverting to the general question, we may note that indications are not wanting in *The Theory of Good and Evil* itself, that the commensurability of values, even were it assumed to be a fact, would be hostile to the doctrine of intrinsic values therein developed. Two examples will serve to justify this statement. In the discussion of Justice we find the following principles laid down: “Each element in life should receive the weight that is due to its intrinsic quality, and not merely to its amount measured by a hedonistic or any other merely quantitative standard” (I, 262). “The superior man’s good is worth more than the inferior man’s (whatever the nature of his superiority)—how much more must be decided by our judgment of value in each particular case of moral choice. The superior man’s good has more value than that of the inferior man, simply because it is a greater good” (I, 264). I, for one,

find it impossible to reconcile these pronouncements with the statement already mentioned, that "it is right in some cases to prefer a larger amount of lower good to a smaller amount of higher good."

The second example is furnished by the chapter on "Punishment and Forgiveness." In the course of his criticism of Mr. Bradley's theory of punishment, Dr. Rashdall says that the idea of expressing moral guilt in terms of physical pain "seems to be essentially and intrinsically unmeaning. There is absolutely no commensurability between the two things" (I, 289). As to the justice of this criticism there cannot be two opinions. But Dr. Rashdall apparently does not see that it is as fatal to his own doctrine as it is to Mr. Bradley's. If sin and pain are not commensurable, how can we claim commensurability for virtue and pleasure, or for virtue and culture? Sin and pain are values, intrinsic values, no less than are virtue, culture, and pleasure. No theory of value can afford to neglect the negative values; and what is true of the negative values in respect of comparability and commensurability must be true also of the positive values.

There is one final objection, which, from a general ethical point of view, must be raised against the doctrine of the commensurability of all values. I have attempted to show that that doctrine, so far as it has any theoretical justification at all, is applicable only where there is a single standard of value, to which all goods may be referred for measurement; and the value of each particular good will, and must, be measured in a quasi-mathematical manner. The ultimate good being, in such a case, agreed upon, the only questions that can arise are those of quantity. Now, it is obvious that, measured quantitatively, any two or more goods which come up for comparison may prove to be equally valuable. And whenever this happens in a case of moral choice, we shall be faced by a conflict of duties which does not, on these premises, admit of theoretical solution. It is right for a man always to choose the greatest good; but if the possible courses of action are equally good, and yet

mutually exclusive, or even—as may well be the case—mutually destructive, it will be right for him to choose any one of them. But the moral consciousness will not acquiesce in this verdict. It holds, and is bound to hold, that in any given circumstances, one course, and one only, is the right one for any one individual; and that his preference of that good cannot, in the nature of the case, involve his sacrificing any good of equal value. This is also the view of Dr. Rashdall. The difficulty here pointed out is inherent in all teleological theories which take a monistic view of the end. It does not affect a theory, such as Dr. Rashdall's, which regards the good as a complex of intrinsic values. It does not do so precisely because intrinsic values are not commensurable. But the principle on which choice between such intrinsic values is to be decided, is still to seek. Until it is clearly set forth, such a system is not complete.

A great part of Dr. Rashdall's argument is based upon an appeal to the common moral judgments of mankind. It is, to my mind, very doubtful whether there is ever any conscious weighing of goods against each other, in the way described by Dr. Rashdall. The least deliberation would suffice to reveal the impossibility of reaching any satisfactory decision on such principles. But in any case, I am not concerned to combat this appeal. I have been throughout dealing with the theoretical problem; and this, after all, is the main interest of the matter. No doctrine can stand which defies the best-established philosophical distinctions. The gulf between quality and quantity cannot be bridged by any attempted reduction of one to the other.

The whole problem is one for which I do not see any satisfactory theoretical solution. The difficulties inherent in subjectivist or formalistic ethics are incontestable; on the other hand, teleological systems all seem to labour under the defect that the calculation of consequences must always take a quasi-mathematical form; and wherever this is the case we are liable to be arrested by a conflict of duties. Yet the unity and rationality of moral action is a fundamental postulate of the ethical consciousness; and it is true,

as Urban says, that "the logical presupposition of all valuation must be a single incontestable or unconditional value."⁵ His further contention, that we cannot pass from the "logical unity of the subject" to the "empirical unity of *conscious* ends and felt values," reveals the crux of the whole problem. If ethics are to be rationalised at all, we must hold that value is a category of *thought*, and that our moral judgments are "determined by the logical relations of subordination to ultimate ends."⁶ What these relations are seems to be the fundamental problem of ethics, but the limitations of my subject forbid me to do more than attempt to state it.

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⁵ Urban, *op. cit.* p. 381.

⁶ Urban, *op. cit.* p. 383 (who denies that this is the case).